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RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L ABU DHABI 000668

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/02/2018

TAGS: PREL SY AE

SUBJECT: SYRIAN PRESIDENT VISITS UAE

Classified by Charge d'Affaires Martin Quinn, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) On his fourth official visit to Abu Dhabi as Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad met UAE President Khalifa June 1 for yet another "brotherly" discussion reportedly focused on closing Arab ranks on regional issues and seeking expanded investments in Syria. The visit follows within days of UAE Vice President Mohammed bin Rashid's (MbR) unofficial visit to Damascus (where he met with Assad on the margins of his participation in an equestrian endurance race); MbR visited Syria in his official capacity February 18-19, 2008. UAE President Khalifa, with Foreign Minister Abdullah (AbZ), participated in the Arab League Summit March 29-30 in Damascus and also visited Syria in July 2007. Assad was previously in the UAE in December 2006 and is also visiting Kuwait and Libya on this trip. His primary meetings in Abu Dhabi involved President Khalifa (who met Assad at the airport and hosted him for a formal luncheon) and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ).

¶2. (SBU) Aside from the political engagement inherent in such a visit, and Syria's desire to overcome political isolation, press reports indicate a strong Syrian interest in investment. The UAE is reportedly Syria's third-largest regional trading partner (with mutual trade valued at over 20 billion Syrian pounds in 2006 [approx 438 million USD]), yet seeks to gain from the UAE's booming real estate market with increased investments. Following his overnight in Abu Dhabi on June 1, Assad visited Dubai -- as he had during his December 2006 visit. His host in the booming marketplace of Dubai was its business-oriented ruler MbR, who also holds the federal titles of Vice President and Prime Minister.

¶3. (C) Post has little insight into the content of private discussion with Assad. Some interlocutors interpret the visit as a Syrian "thank you" to Gulf States who provided high level attendance at the Damascus Summit. MbZ hosted a dinner for U.S. Secretary of Treasury Paulson at the Emirates Palace fish restaurant on June 1, while the Syrians were dining barely a hundred meters away at the Emirates Palace Italian restaurant. Both Assad and Paulson received UAE-guided tours of the Saadiyat Island (future Abu Dhabi cultural district) exhibit -- about an hour apart. Post spent several hours working to ensure a sufficient interval of separation between MbR's June 2 lunch with Assad and his subsequent meeting with Paulson in Dubai.

¶4. (C) Comment: In past visits we have been told that the UAE makes it a point to deliver "firm messages" to Assad, although the press coverage and brotherly hugs generally ensure that the upbeat optic of each visit makes a stronger impression than whatever "firm" message might have been mixed into the cordial dinner conversations. The UAE is home to many Syrians and relations between the two peoples run deep. It should not be forgotten that Bashar al-Assad and several of his al-Nahyan hosts and contemporaries essentially grew up together as the sons of (more or less autocratic/authoritarian) Arab leaders. Strangers they are not. End comment.

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